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IN PRAISE OF PREVISION

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Too many young people are permitted to hand in unorganized and half-digested masses in place of themes; weary English teachers are continually going over such "huge raw collops—and never mind gristle"—of more or less interesting idea. Probably this happens most often because teachers permit themselves to be influenced by the notion that the chief good of writing is aiding pupils to find out what they think. Talking or writing for this purpose has undoubted place and value. But the teacher who accepts themes that have not been brought unquestionably past the stages of chaos and into distinct order and organization is not only unfair to himself; he is even more radically unfair to his pupils. For the highest value of composition courses is training young people to think and to express themselves about what interests them, enabling them to make something usable of the avalanches of new matter that constantly hurtle into their minds.

Toward securing this value, the writing of any composition, even the simplest, can be of no assured good unless it is the product of thorough prevision or planning. "In the writing you will have partly convinced yourself; the delay must precede any beginning," as Stevenson says.

Obviously, if a pupil is to delay to some purpose, no theme is rightly assigned him till he can see his way clear to go at it intelligently and can come through with some satisfaction to himself. When he has done this, he may profitably submit his work for criticism and help in bettering it. Most essentials of sentence-structure and of form can be handled nowise but in this way, by painstaking revision. The English teacher's problem here is to reduce the required details to a reasonable minimum and to group

them so that but a few are attempted—and mastered—each year, so few that he can give them adequate heed without encroaching on the really essential work of the courses, the training in thought-organization or prevision.

This is a quite different problem. The first requisites for a proper attack upon it, as several writers in the *English Journal* have recently pointed out,¹ are something that seems to the pupils themselves worthy and possible of expression and somebody definite to say it to. Yet with living motive thus secured, there stand between the pupils and the actual business of speaking or writing the difficulties of organization. As a mode of attack here Mr. Sherwin Cody has suggested that one should write each composition twice. The first copy he should read through and destroy; by the second writing he should so far have mastered his ideas as to present them clearly and interestingly. This is certainly a valid and useful device, to which many of us are indebted. It is my purpose in this paper, however, to outline if I can a somewhat more organized method of going to work. The effectiveness of these suggestions must depend primarily on two things: that pupils have at the first none but vivid and brief matters to present, and that the more difficult work be handled in the general order that is here developed.

The problems of organization are indeed, and particularly in the early years, far simpler than they have sometimes been made to appear. I have amused myself by asking our normal-school Seniors to state what essentials of rhetoric a sixth-grade class need know to tell an incident like an adventure with a cannon-cracker, or to explain how Indians build a tepee. You know of course the results I get. I call them "residua of rhetoric": a topic sentence, fully developed, in each paragraph; emphatic arrangement in the theme and in the paragraphs; coherence in arrangement and connection; paragraph introduction and conclusion; and so on. Grade pupils need nothing whatever of all this. For any small theme presenting their own observations, direct or truly *realized* through others' record—their themes should always be so based, and brief—only

¹ Miss McKittrick (September, 1913); Miss Hodgson (April, 1914); Mr. McComb (September, 1914).

a handful of simple technique ideas are at all usable. The process is something like this:

1. Recalling the interesting details of the incident and cutting them down to a very brief time, eliminating all tag ends fore and aft. This may be done by noting on the board all that the class remembers, of a picnic for example, then grouping the matters under small heads—brief incidents; each pupil may select one such group to present. This is typical of the approach in oral or written recitations on all sorts of subjects whose details have in one way or another become part of the pupils' real interests—geography or nature-study or history. These need no introduction whatever, but start close to the center of activity and stop promptly when the essentials have been told.

2. Arranging the details noted down, always, in the early grades, in time order; and adding for ready use later simple but various time connectives.

3. Noting also the greatest possible variety of vivid details—motion, color, smells, the basic matters of whatever sort of writing—in specific and live words that will be at hand when the actual writing begins.

That is really all. The matter of arrangement (2), however, undergoes a wide development through problems of increasing difficulty that are worked out. Time order is chiefly used in nine pieces of fact (observation) writing out of ten; but it is varied to suit conditions:

- A. In introducing a sentence or two of description, the pupil learns that he should give first the outline of the person or scene to hang his details on; the same principle applies where, as in the account of a churn or of building a rabbit-house, he sees the need of chronicling first of all what he is talking about and perhaps the materials he will use. So in a game he finds he must explain first the apparatus and the object. From all this stands out the principle, essential to most writing, of *beginning with basic matters*.

- B. For fitting an explanation, say of a mine, to his younger brother's understanding, the pupil discovers that he will best begin with what his brother does know, like the layer cake to explain earth structure and the well and bucket for shaft and cage. Thus

emerges that widely necessary arrangement method of *starting with what is simple or known to the reader*. Happy the class whose textbooks really illustrate this! Then, too, a set of problems to be attempted only after many in time order have been handled:

C. When time order does not easily fit, as in visualizing persons or scenes, a simple *arrangement in space* must be planned and held to, as from the outline of the person to his dress, and then to head and features; from the near to the remote in a landscape; or any one of numberless ways so the plan be easy to follow. This carries over to accounts of harbors and earth formations and so on.

D. Finally, in telling of kinds of dogs or of boys, and even in a great many themes that mainly follow some order already discovered, the desire to be vivid and forceful frequently strengthens the suggestion that *the striking detail*, possibly of color or of movement, *should come first*, but that *the most significant*, as of feature or mannerism or the like, *be saved to the last*; this is the most widely useful principle of emphasis.

With this discussion of arrangement, one has in hand all the prevision principles needed for the single-topic (generally one-paragraph) fact theme of whatever type. For longer themes, the organization process consists of three steps: first, grouping all the material collected under the fewest possible main heads and eliminating the dispensable, as in the grouping for selection discussed above (p. 502); secondly, arranging these heads according to the principles of clearness and emphasis noted, and stating fully their relation to each other; and, thirdly, proceeding with the matters under each head as for the single topic already many times handled. Of course, for themes of great length and complexity, to be attempted much later, the writer has to group and arrange the matter of each main division also, and carry the process perhaps through several stages before he reaches the simple topic-unit; the principle is the same throughout. May I suggest that the groupings need never be so conventional and obvious divisions as "mentally, morally, and physically" or "birth and parentage. early training," and so on. Separation into introduction, body. and conclusion, as if these were co-ordinate and essential parts

of the whole, should, I believe, never be permitted.¹ I may also protect myself by mentioning that the single topics finally arrived at through the processes of grouping will not necessarily be the paragraphs indented in the written theme. Paragraph dividing, which is chiefly a matter of convenience in reading, need hardly be discussed in prevision, and, save for the dialogue paragraph, scarcely requires mention in the grades. Much nearer to being essential is ample and definite statement of relation by proper connectives.

There are two additional matters that should be well threshed out in the course of prevision. The most important is the taking of notes from observation and from other people's talk or books. *The basic necessity here is properly crediting to their source all facts and opinions not directly observed by the note-taker or appended as his personal conclusions.* This is an affair in which there is, in most schools with which I am acquainted, much harmful laxity; indeed, I may go so far as to say that the recitation of lessons memorized from one text, and the permitted writing of papers on subjects crammed from sources the pupils do not know how to utilize properly, are a direct training in plagiarism which quite obscures any incidental preachments on honesty in these fields. On the other hand, if notes are properly and carefully taken in the writer's own words, they may be made of great assistance toward getting apt and vivid expression at the time when it is most needed. The second essential preliminary to effective writing is the study of good work by other people, and of course of masterly work particularly. But it is desirable that this be the reading of literature rather than the perusal of models clipped and shorn for illustrating structural problems. For the actual organization of what one has to say proceeds in comprehensible and formulated ways, and has really least help to gain from the study of the masters. Knowledge of their work gives far richer and more fruitful suggestions of wide fields of thought; and it develops the appreciation and the command of live and specific wording. It is here that composition courses are inseparably

¹ See Robert W. Neal, "The Deadly Grip of Tradition," *English Journal*, III (February, 1914), 119.

dependent on literary study and should make more of it than they often do.

There is, I believe, little further to the prevision rhetoric for fact themes, the chronicles of observation. Yet within these limits there is the widest room for individuality of method; there are almost as many possible organizations of a problem as there are writers to attempt it.

It is well to note here specifically that fact compositions have rightly no topic thought—the *subject* discussed plus the *predicate*, the writer's conclusion about it—and so no formal paragraph development, but only details given in order. They have merely a subject or topic, whether or not announced in a topic sentence. This absence of a central or topic *thought* characterizes objective description and narrative¹ and also straight fact explanations. Yet children's themes, like most other fact writing, contain many incidental conclusions by the writers. And provided these are genuine thoughts about what the writers have realized, they are most welcome. Children's observation of living facts, on which themes are always to be based, is made from the blessed motive of curiosity, sole saving force from the placid swallowing of ideas and opinions which school courses are too likely to encourage. And since the aim of English work is to aid the pupils to make reasonable judgments about these things and present them with some effect, nothing can be better than their free expression of what is really their own opinion.

But such statements of opinion should rarely stand unchallenged; they cannot in alert classes. They must be sharply differentiated from facts, just as conclusions should invariably be in text and in recitation: "This is what you think about it; good. How does that strike the rest of you?" "That is William's conclusion; he had a great many facts to judge from, as he shows. But did you find any different opinion? What do you think about it?" And they must always be marked, in the pupils' minds and in their writing, as opinions—with "I think" and "It seems to me." Thus it will be made evident that conclusions are worthless

¹ Cf. Clippenger, *Teacher's Manual to Accompany "Illustrated Lessons in Composition and Rhetoric,"* the last paragraph on p. 4.

except when they are backed with full array of the facts from which they are drawn. Yet these trifling opinions make no change whatever in the organization problem; they merely stand, marked as opinion, at the end of the theme or incidentally in its course. Their differentiation from facts, however, becomes, in the high-school course, the basis for thorough study of how the conclusion is developed from the facts and is the center about which they are grouped in writing—the study, in short, of the methods of paragraph development which all composition texts include. All this simply shows how truly the examples and details and comparisons and statements of cause and effect are there but to make clear the writer's basic thought, or to support it against opposition, or to carry it through to its consequences. The prevision of the thought-paragraph, however, proceeds by the same steps of grouping and arrangement as those previously considered. Only, the conclusion, which the writer often arrives at late in his thinking about the matter, is at once written plainly at the head of the notes and the outline; it becomes thus the central point of the final organization, and affects particularly the reselection and the proportion of the facts and topics that develop it. Because of the added complexity which the demands of the topic thought bring, it is probable that only the single-topic (paragraph) thought-theme can well be handled in detail in present high-school courses.

As to written outlines: In order to secure to pupils the right values of prevision for whatever writing or speaking they do, it is essential to make sure that they do the whole labor of it understandingly. For the single-topic fact theme, this is most simple; one can test the matter, orally or in writing, by having the writers give their general and their closely limited subject, the readers they have chosen, and the details they will present, in the order established; for instance, from the general assignment on the Fourth of July, the excitement about one cannon-cracker is to be told to the class; the details are: what we planned to do with the cracker; what it did; cleaning up afterward. The same sort of thing is good for longer themes; but as I have suggested, prevision, and hence outlining, may well take account of the connectives also, stating at all places of possible doubt the precise relation and

importance of facts and groups of facts. Sometimes it may be helpful to require that these connecting links be sentences which announce new phases of the subject, but phrases are often adequate. The primary use of the sentence is to state interpretations; the fruit of prevision for the thought-theme must always be a sentence stating its conclusion. Whether the teacher shall, aside from this, demand phrase- or sentence-outlining must of course be a question to be worked out by his individual genius. Yet the full sentence-outlining or the briefing of a theme now and then seems to me a keener and more living bit of discipline than any that the grind of declension or agony of translation of the classics, for instance, ever resulted in.

I have tried to present in this paper some correctives for that firing at random which is too likely to be the pupil's method of attacking an assignment. The entire trend of my struggles with the teaching of composition has been toward emphasizing prevision of written and oral work, and I have certainly found the shift of emphasis constructively helpful to students as well as saving of ink and nerves.